

The club at Patrick Henry High certainly would. The group was founded two years ago with encouragement but no specific stage managing by local youth pastors. This afternoon its faculty adviser, a math teacher and Evangelical Free Church member named Sara Van Der Werk, sits silently for most of the meeting, although she takes part in the final embrace. The club serves as an emotional bulwark for members dealing with life at a school where two students died last year in off-campus gunfire. Today a club member requests prayer for "those people who got in that big fight [this morning]." Another asks the Lord to "bless the racial-reconciliation stuff." (Patrick Henry is multiethnic; the prayer club is overwhelming white.) Just before Easter the group experienced its first First Amendment conflict: whether it could hang posters on all school walls like other non-school-sponsored clubs. Patrick Henry principal Paul McMahan eventually decreed that putting up posters is off limits to everyone, leading to some resentment against the Christians. Nonetheless, McMahan lauds them for "understanding the boundaries" between church and state.

In Alabama, the new school-prayer bill attempts to skirt those boundaries. The legislation requires "a brief period of quiet reflection for not more than 60 seconds with the participation of each pupil in the classroom." Although the courts have upheld some moment-of-silence policies, civil libertarians say they have struck down laws featuring pro-prayer supporting language of the sort they discern in Alabama's bill. In the eyes of many church-club planters, such fracasas amount to wasted effort. Says Doug Clark, field director of the National Network of Youth ministries: "Our energy is being poured into what kids can do voluntarily and on their own. That seems to us to be where God is working."

Reaction to the prayer clubs may depend on which besieged minority one feels part of. In the many areas where Conservative Christians feel looked down on, they welcome the emotional support for their children's faith. Similarly, non-Christians in the Bible Belt may be put off by the clubs' evangelical fervor; members of the chess society, after all, do not inform peers that they must push pawns or risk eternal damnation. Not everyone shares the enthusiasm Proffitt recently expressed at a youth rally in Niagara Falls, N.Y.: "When an awakening takes place, we see 50, 100, 1,000, 10,000 come to Christ. Can you imagine 100, or 300, come to Christ in your school? We want to see our campuses come to Christ." Watchdog organizations like Americans United for the Separation of Church and State report cases in which such zeal has approached harassment of students and teachers, student prayer leaders have seemed mere puppets for adult evangelists, and activists have tried to establish prayer clubs in elementary schools, where the description "student-run" seems disingenuous.

Nevertheless, the Jewish committee's Stern concedes that "there's been much less controversy than one might have expected from the hysterical predictions we made." Americans United director Barry Lynn notes that "in most school districts, students are spontaneously forming clubs and acting upon their own and not outsiders' religious agendas." A.C.L.U. lobbyist Terri Schroeder also supports the Equal Access Act, pointing out that the First Amendment's Free Exercise clause protecting religious expression is as vital as its Establishment Clause, which prohibits government from promoting a creed. The civil libertarians' acceptance of the clubs owes something to their use as a defense against what they consider a truly bad idea: Istook's school-prayer amendment. Says Lynn: "Most reasonable people say, 'If

so many kids are praying legally in the public schools now, why would you possibly want to amend the Constitution?'"

For now, the prospects for prayer clubs seem unlimited. In fact, the tragic shooting of eight prayer-club members last December in West Paducah, Ky., by 14-year-old Michael Carneal provided the cause with matyrs and produced a hero in prayer-club president Ben Strong, who persuaded Carneal to lay down his gun. Strong recalls that the club's daily meetings used to draw only 35 to 60 students out of Heath High School's 600. "People didn't really look down on us, but I don't know if it was cool to be a Christian," he says. Now 100 to 150 teens attend. Strong has since toured three states extolling the value of Christian clubs. "It woke a lot of kids up," he says. "That's true everywhere I've spoken. This is a national thing."

ANNOUNCEMENT BY THE SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. GILCREST). In the absence of a designee of the majority leader, the gentleman from Texas was permitted to continue.

CONGRESS MUST ELIMINATE MARRIAGE TAX PENALTY NOW

(Mr. WELLER asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute and to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. WELLER. Mr. Speaker, why is it so important that we pass the Marriage Tax Elimination Act of 1998? I think a series of questions best illustrates why.

Do Americans feel that it is fair that the average working married couple pays higher taxes just because they are married? Do Americans feel that it is fair that 21 million married working couples pay on the average \$1,400 more just because they are married? Do Americans feel that it is right that our Tax Code actually provides an incentive to get divorced?

Of course not. Americans recognize that the marriage tax penalty is unfair. Twenty-one million married working couples pay on the average \$1,400 more just because they are married. That is real money for real people. One year's tuition at Joliet Junior College in the south suburbs of Chicago equals \$1,400. Fourteen hundred dollars is 3 months of child care at a local day care center in Joliet as well. That is real money for real people.

Let us make elimination of the marriage tax penalty our number one priority in this year's budget. Let us eliminate the marriage tax penalty. Let us eliminate it now.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to highlight what is arguably the most unfair provision in the U.S. tax code: the marriage tax penalty. I want to thank you for your long term interest in bringing parity to the tax burden imposed on working married couples compared to a couple living together outside of marriage.

In January, President Clinton gave his State of the Union Address outlining many of the things he wants to do with the budget surplus.

A surplus provided by the bipartisan budget agreement which: Cut waste, put America's

fiscal house in order, and held Washington's feet to the fire to balance the budget.

While President Clinton paraded a long list of new spending totaling at least \$46—\$48 billion in new programs—we believe that a top priority should be returning the budget surplus to America's families as additional middle-class tax relief.

This Congress has given more tax relief to the middle class and working poor than any Congress of the last half century.

I think the issue of the marriage penalty can best be framed by asking these questions: Do Americans feel its fair that our tax code imposes a higher tax penalty on marriage? Do Americans feel its fair that the average married working couple pays almost \$1,400 more in taxes than a couple with almost identical income living together outside of marriage? Is it right that our tax code provides an incentive to get divorced?

In fact, today the only form one can file to avoid the marriage tax penalty is paperwork for divorce. And that is just wrong!

Since 1969, our tax laws have punished married couples when both spouses work. For no other reason than the decision to be joined in holy matrimony, more than 21 million couples a year are penalized. They pay more in taxes than they would if they were single. Not only is the marriage penalty unfair, it's wrong that our tax code punishes society's most basic institution. The marriage tax penalty exacts a disproportionate toll on working women and lower income couples with children. In many cases it is a working women's issue.

Let me give you an example of how the marriage tax penalty unfairly affects middle class married working couples.

For example, a machinist, at a Caterpillar manufacturing plant in my home district of Joliet, makes \$30,500 a year in salary. His wife is a tenured elementary school teacher, also bringing home \$30,500 a year in salary. If they would both file their taxes as singles, as individuals, they would pay 15%.

MARRIAGE PENALTY EXAMPLE IN THE SOUTH SUBURBS

	Machinist	School teacher	Couple
Adjusted gross income	\$30,500	\$30,500	\$61,000
Less personal exemption and standard deduction	6,550	6,550	11,800
Taxable income	23,950	23,950	49,200
Tax liability	3,592.5	3,592.5	8,563
Marriage penalty			1,378

But if they chose to live their lives in holy matrimony, and now file jointly, their combined income of \$61,000 pushes them into a higher tax bracket of 28 percent, producing a tax penalty of \$1400 in higher taxes.

On average, America's married working couples pay \$1,400 more a year in taxes than individuals with the same incomes. That's serious money. Everyday we get closer to April 15th more married couples will be realizing that they are suffering the marriage tax penalty.

Particularly if you think of it in terms of: A down payment on a house or a car, one years tuition at a local community college, or several months worth of quality child care at a local day care center.

To that end, Congressman DAVID MCINTOSH and I have authored the Marriage Tax Elimination Act.